

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 518

PS 020 323

AUTHOR Grober, Jacqueline S.
TITLE Preschoolers' Social Problem Solving in Sexually Abusive and Non-Sexual Situations.
PUB DATE Aug 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (99th, San Francisco, CA, August 16-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; *Context Effect; Generalization; Individual Characteristics; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Prevention; *Sexual Abuse; *Social Cognition
IDENTIFIERS Scripts (Knowledge Structures); *Self Protection; *Social Problem Solving; Strategy Choice

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the possibility that certain contextual factors and subject variables influence children's deployment of self-protective skills in unsafe social situations. Contextual factors included characteristics of the antagonist in the situation and the nature of the social dilemma. Subject variables included characteristics of the child. The sample consisted of 62 three- to six-year-old preschoolers. Each child was individually administered a measure of problem solving developed for the study. Four stories that systematically varied the two contextual factors were used. The antagonist was either an adult or a preschool-age peer, and the social dilemma was either sexual or nonsexual. For each dilemma, children were asked what the target child could do or say if he or she did not want to go along with the suggested activity. Responses were coded and analyzed. Results suggest that the nature of the dilemma and the child's age influence self-protective ability. In regard to the influence of the dilemma, children were capable of generating effective solutions to nonsexual situations, but were unable to do so in sexual encounters. Younger preschoolers generated significantly more ineffective strategies than did older preschoolers. Implications for child sexual abuse prevention programs are discussed. Appended are 16 references and related materials. (GLR)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED341518

PS 020323

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

PRESCHOOLERS' SOCIAL PROBLEM SOLVING IN SEXUALLY ABUSIVE
AND NON-SEXUAL SITUATIONS

by

Jacqueline S. Grober
Michigan State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jacqueline S.
Grober

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper presented in M. P. McGrath (Chair), New Perspectives on Sexual Abuse
Education for Preschoolers. Symposium conducted at the 1991 annual convention of
the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA.

Introduction

The papers presented thus far suggest that both subject variables and contextual factors influence children's deployment of self-protective skills (Kiemel & Bogat, 1991; Liang & McGrath, 1991). The effect of contextual and subject variables on behavior in common social dilemmas has been carefully elucidated by the social problem solving (or SPS) literature (for a review see Dodge, 1986; Rubin & Krasnor, 1986). Two contextual factors examined in SPS research--the characteristics of the antagonist and the nature of the social dilemma--are of particular interest to child sexual abuse prevention work. The "antagonist" is the person, other than the child, involved in the social dilemma. (In sexually abusive situations this is the perpetrator.) SPS research suggests that children vary the strategies they use according to the antagonist's age, gender, social status, and familiarity (Holmberg, 1980; Krasnor, 1982; Langlois, Gottfried, & Seay, 1973; Rubin & Krasnor, 1983; Rubin & Krasnor, 1986). The nature of the social dilemma is defined by the conflict between the antagonist and the child. (In sexually abusive situations this is the request to engage in unwanted sexual touching.) SPS research suggests that depending upon the nature of the conflict, children choose to enact more prosocial or aggressive problem solving strategies (Krasnor, 1982).

In addition, some SPS studies have indicated that characteristics of the child, such as his/her age, are related to problem solving ability. For instance, younger children typically generate solutions that are less effective than those of older children (e.g., Fischler & Kendall, 1988).

This study investigated whether these contextual and subject variables also influenced performance in unsafe social situations.

Method

Because the effect of contextual factors on baseline self-protection skills is the focus of this paper, only pretest data will be reported. In addition, this research employed a different sample than the previous papers. The sample used here consisted of 62 preschoolers ranging in age from 3.3 to 6.2 years. Each preschooler was individually administered a measure of problem solving that was developed for this study. There were four stories that systematically varied the two contextual factors. The antagonist was either an adult or a preschool-age peer. And the social dilemma was either sexual or non-sexual (see Figure 1). For the sexual dilemmas, the antagonist asked the child to "touch private parts." For the non-sexual dilemmas the antagonist asked the child to cross a busy street the child was not allowed to cross. Gender of the characters in the dilemmas was matched to the gender of the subjects so that boys were presented with stories involving only male characters and girls were presented with stories involving only females. For each dilemma, children were asked what the target child could do or say if he/she did not want to go along with the suggested activity.¹

¹ For a copy of the assessment instrument or coding manual used in this study write the author at 129 Psychology Research Building, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1117.

Responses were then classified into one of ten categories (see Figure 2). The first three categories (assertive, non-confrontational, and help-seeking) are similar to the "Say no, go, and tell" categories of interest in child sexual abuse prevention research (e.g., Miltenberger & Thiesse-Duffy, 1988; Ratto & Bogat, 1990; Wurtele, Kast, Miller-Perrin, & Kondrick, 1989). The remaining strategy categories, such as finagle, and unrealistic are similar to those used in the SPS literature (Caplan, Weissberg, Bersoff, Ezekowitz, & Wells, 1986; Rubin & Krasnor, 1983). Figure 3 provides some examples of responses that were classified in these new scoring categories (Grober, 1990).¹

Results

Using a median split procedure, children were divided into two age groups: younger preschoolers (ages 3.3 years - 4.3 years) and older preschoolers (4.4 years - 6.2 years). A series of 2 X 2 X 2 repeated-measures ANOVAs were used to assess the impact of subject and contextual variables on the types of solutions generated. The age of the antagonist and the nature of the dilemma were within-subjects factors. The age of the child was a between-subjects factor.

Regarding the contextual factors, no main effects for the age of the antagonist were found. The nature of the dilemma, however, did significantly influence children's strategy choice.

Fewer assertive [$F(1, 60) = 5.21, p < .05$], rule-based [$F(1, 60) = 21.61, p < .001$], and help-seeking [$F(1, 60) = 8.20, p < .05$] solutions were offered for the sexual than for the non-sexual dilemmas (see Figure 4). However, for non-confrontational solutions this

relationship was reversed so that children suggested running away more frequently for the sexual than for the non-sexual dilemmas [$F(1, 60) = 6.19, p < .05$] (see Figure 4).

Regardless of the dilemma, the child's age also significantly affected the strategy suggested. Younger preschoolers offered a greater number of unrealistic [$F(1, 58) = 4.95, p < .05$] and compliance [$F(1, 58) = 4.44, p < .05$] solutions compared to older preschoolers (see Figure 5). In addition, younger preschoolers were less likely than older preschoolers to suggest assertive solutions [$F(1, 58) = 3.07, p < .10$] (see Figure 5).

Discussion

These results suggest that the nature of the dilemma as well as the child's age influence self-protective ability. Regarding the influence of the dilemma, children were capable of generating effective solutions to the non-sexual situations; however, they were unable to do so in the sexual encounters. What accounts for their failure to generate these known resistance strategies in sexual situations?

Script theory provides one possible explanation. Briefly, scripts are "mental blue prints" of familiar contextual cues and the behaviors usually enacted in response to those cues (Schank & Abelson, 1977). Scripts can help people understand and respond effectively to everyday events (Langer, 1978).

Preschoolers are preoccupied with the concrete details of a script and do not easily generalize scripted behavior to similar, yet novel, situations (Nelson, 1981). Thus children may fail to generalize the well-known self-protective strategies they use in common unsafe situations to an unfamiliar encounter involving a request to

engage in unwanted sexual touching.

Self-protective ability was also affected by the child's age. Whereas both younger and older preschoolers failed to generalize known resistance strategies from non-sexual to sexual situations; younger preschoolers, in addition, generated significantly more ineffective strategies (e.g., compliance, unrealistic solutions) than older preschoolers. This finding suggests that younger preschoolers do not have the ability to set appropriate self-protective goals or to distinguish effective from ineffective solutions. Older preschoolers, on the other hand, seem simply to fail to generalize well-known, appropriate self-protective strategies from non-sexual to sexual encounters.

These results have clear implications for child sexual abuse prevention programs. Curricula may be more effective if program content is tailored to the different types of deficits exhibited by younger and older preschoolers. For example, programs aimed at younger preschoolers may need to concentrate on helping young preschoolers set appropriate self-protective goals and distinguish between effective and ineffective strategies in all types of unsafe situations. In contrast, programs for older children may be more beneficial if they enhance generalization of well-known resistance behaviors. This could be accomplished by including exercises that emphasize parallels between behaviors used in common resistance situations and self-protection in sexually abusive encounters.

In conclusion, this research suggests that both subject and contextual factors influence children's self-protective ability. Child sexual abuse prevention efforts may

be more effective if the importance of these variables is carefully taken into account in both curriculum development and program evaluation research.

REFERENCES

- Caplan, M. Z., Weissberg, R. P., Bersoff, D. M., Ezekowitz, W., & Wells, M. L. (1986). The middle school alternative solutions test (AST) scoring manual. Unpublished manuscript, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- Dodge, K. A. (1986). A social information processing model of social competence in children. In M. Perlmutter (Ed.), The Minnesota symposia on child psychology (Vol. 18, pp. 77-125). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fischler, G. L., & Kendall, P. C. (1988). Social cognitive problem solving and childhood adjustment: Qualitative and topological analyses. Cognitive Therapy and Research, 12, 133-153.
- Grober, J. S. (1990). Preschool alternative solutions test (PAST) scoring manual. Unpublished manuscript, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.
- Holmberg, M. (1980). The development of social interchange patterns from 12 to 42 months. Child Development, 51, 448-456.
- Kiemel, K. B. & Bogat, G. A. (1991, August). Assessing preschoolers' fears following a sexual abuse education program. In M. P. McGrath (Chair), New perspectives on sexual abuse education for preschoolers. Symposium conducted at the American Psychological Association convention, San Francisco, CA.
- Krasnor, L. R. (1982). An observational study of social problem solving in young children. In K. H. Rubin & H. S. Ross (Eds.), Peer relations and social skills in childhood (pp.113-132). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Langer, E. (1978). Rethinking the role of thought in social interactions. In J. Harvey, W. Ickes, & R. Kidd (Eds.), New directions in attribution research, (Vol. 2). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Langlois, J., Gottfried, N., & Seay, B. (1973). The influences of sex of peer on the social behavior of preschool age children. Developmental Psychology, 8, 93-98.

- Liang, B. & McGrath, M. P. (1991, August). How well do children learn sexual abuse prevention concepts? In M. P. McGrath (Chair), New perspectives on sexual abuse education for preschoolers. Symposium conducted at the American Psychological Association convention, San Francisco, CA.
- Miltenberger, R. G., & Thiesse-Duffy, E. (1988). Evaluation of home-based programs for teaching personal safety skills to children. Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 21, 81-87.
- Nelson, K. (1981). Social cognition in a script framework. In J. H. Flavell & R. D. Ross (Eds.), Social cognitive development: Frontiers and possible futures (pp. 97-118). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ratto, R. & Bogat, G. A. (1990). An evaluation of a preschool curriculum to prevent the sexual abuse of children. Journal of Community Psychology, 18, 289-297.
- Rubin, K. H., & Krasnor, L. R. (1983). Age and gender differences in the development of representative social problem solving skill. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 4, 463-475.
- Rubin, K. H., & Krasnor, L. R. (1986). Social-cognitive and social behavioral perspectives on problem solving. In M. Perlmutter (Ed.), The Minnesota symposia on child psychology (Vol. 18, pp. 1-67). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Shank, R., & Abelson, R. P. (1977) Scripts, plans, goals, and understanding. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Figure 1

SYSTEMATIC VARIATION OF TWO CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

		<u>Age of Antagonist</u>	
		Peer	Adult
<u>Nature</u> <u>of</u> <u>Dilemma</u>	<i>Non-Sexual</i>	Story 1	Story 3
	<i>Sexual</i>	Story 2	Story 4

Figure 2

Scoring Categories

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Assertive** | 6. Unrealistic** |
| 2. Non-Confrontational** | 7. Aggressive |
| 3. Help-Seeking** | 8. Passive |
| 4. Rule-Based** | 9. Restructure |
| 5. Finagle | 10. Compliant** |

****Categories for which significant results were found.**

Figure 3

Sample Responses for Five Scoring Categories

Rule-Based Solutions

e.g., "We're not supposed to do that."

Finagle Solutions

e.g., "Let's watch a movie instead."

Unrealistic Solutions

e.g., "I'd shoot him with my ray gun."

Passive Solutions

e.g., "I'd just ignore him."

Compliant Solutions

e.g., "I'd do what they want. I'd give in."

Figure 4

INFLUENCE OF NATURE OF DILEMMA ON
FOUR STRATEGY CATEGORIES

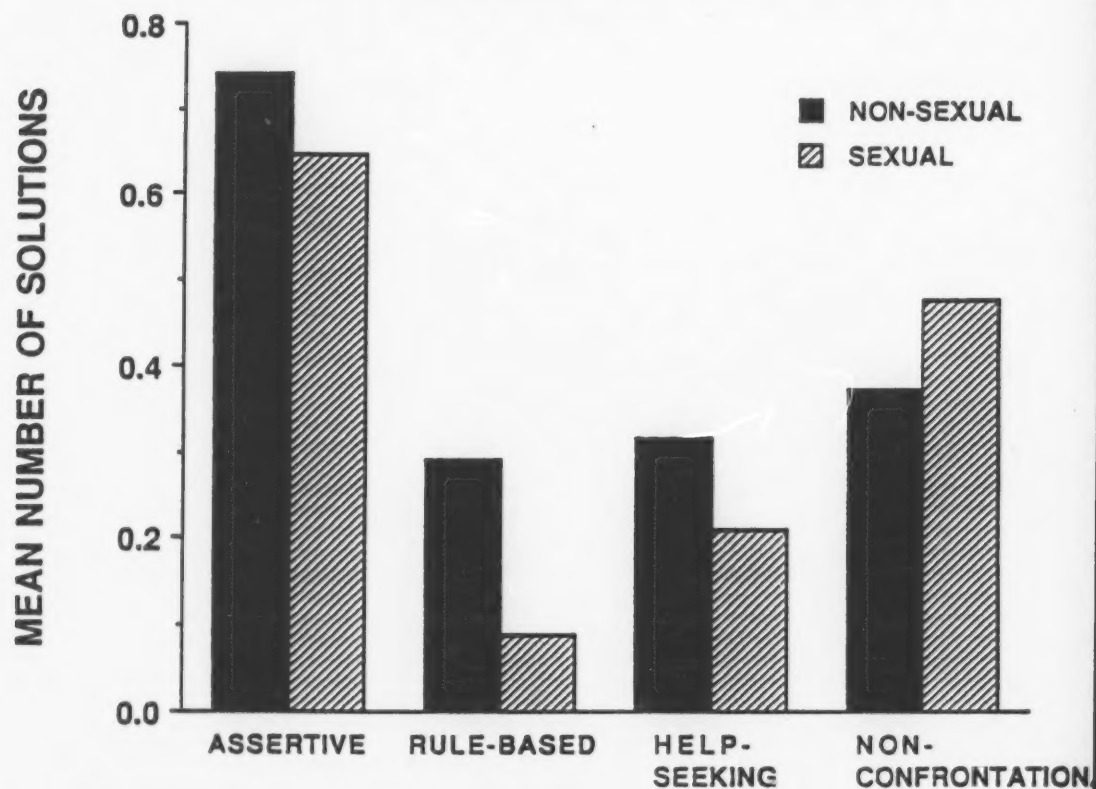


Figure 5

